



MARTIN TANGORA

INTERVIEWED BY LOMA KARKLINS

May 19, 2012

ARCHIVES
CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
Pasadena, California



Subject area

Seminar Day, alumni, students, pranks

Abstract

On Seminar Day—Caltech’s annual reunion event—May 19, 2012, for the first time the Caltech Archives and Library offered alumni/ae the opportunity to record mini-interviews with Archives’ staff. Nine people participated, including one alumni spouse and one daughter. These alums held bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees across several divisions, with engineering marginally in the lead. One former student who transferred out of Caltech came back to relate how well his Caltech years had served him in his later studies and career in psychology. Ranging from 10 to 15 minutes in length, the interviews typically relate stories or episodes from student years. Favorite topics include pranks and traditions, some of which have died out. Alumni also reflect on professors and classes which were memorable and on the unique intellectual stimulus that a Caltech education provides. Readers will find that the transcripts of the short interviews reflect the personal and colloquial tone at which the event aimed.

Administrative information

Access

The interview is unrestricted.

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CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY ARCHIVES

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH MARTIN TANGORA

BY LOMA KARKLINS

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

MAY 19, 2012

CALTECH ALUMNI SEMINAR DAY

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

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MARTIN TANGORA

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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Martin Tangora
BS, 1957

by Loma Karklins
Pasadena, California

May 19, 2012

Begin Tape 1

TANGORA: My name is Martin Tangora—I was called Marty at Caltech. I'm from Chicago. I was the class of '57, mathematics option. I mentioned they often called me "Farty Mungora," especially the guys from the other houses, because we used to mutilate people's names that way. I won't mention any sad cases of people who had names that were especially vulnerable to this.

KARKLINS: Good!

TANGORA: So, let's see, one thing I wanted to talk about was what it was like to run for house president—at least in Ricketts House, which was a very politically minded house. I was the house secretary as a junior. I decided to run for president. I had an opponent who I thought was well-liked and well-respected and could beat me, so I took the election seriously. What usually happened was the candidates went door-to-door, room-to-room, and talked to everybody one-on-one—or maybe one-on-two if it was a double room—and, you know, sounded them out about what they wanted and what they thought. And for me, this turned out to be a very good way to learn some things about myself because some of these students would talk frankly to me. Otherwise, I would hardly ever see that—I wouldn't sit at the same table in the dining room and wouldn't be involved in the same activities and so on.

In particular, I remember the one guy who was a nerd. There was this one guy who I thought was a total nerd and I wasn't interested in talking to him except that he was a vote and I thought it would be wrong not to sit down with him. And he told me lots of things about myself that I had never thought about. I didn't really quite believe him when he told me, because I didn't think he was a very good psychologist; but it turned out he was better than I was. He said,

for example, that I had a mania for athletics. I knew I was interested in athletics, but the idea that I had a mania for it, that was completely new to me. It took me a long time—maybe years—to realize what he had his finger on, which was that I not only enjoyed sports—more as a participant than as a spectator—but I did enjoy sports in every way. Also, I used athletics as a criterion for who my friends were, which of course left him out. He wasn't that kind of a person; he wasn't athletic at all. Then he also told me that I had a quick smile—you know, how two people approaching each other, say on campus, recognize each other, and then you have to make a decision when you're going to do the recognition officially—nod your head, smile, say "hello," or whatever. And he said I would smile and say "hello," naming him, and then the smile would vanish from my face, right away; quick smile. And I could see how that would be kind of annoying, or offensive; and I'd never been told that before, of course. That's not the sort of thing people walk up to you and say, "By the way, you have a quick smile." So that was one of the benefits of running for house president. I wish I had more of those stories, but he's the interview that I really remember. He's not around; he died. I can't thank him for that, but anyway I've always appreciated that.

KARKLINS: Did you both keep in touch after that?

TANGORA: No, we didn't. No, we didn't become friends. That would be the end of the movie in Hollywood, but not in real life.

KARKLINS: Of course.

TANGORA: We had no polls. I didn't realize that I was going to win by such a wide margin, but the guys in the house knew that I could do the job; they knew I could make the grades and still do the job. I won the election by a wide margin, but I don't know if I was a good president or not; that's another story. I was actually rewarded for my first term's duty by a vote of no confidence, which I wouldn't remember if it hadn't been written down in my diary and I still have the diary.

I also wanted to talk about this more general thing about Caltech, which was the wonderful attitude that the administration had toward the students. I don't want to say in *loco parentis*, because that usually means we can punish you just as if we were your parents. But here

it meant, we love you as if you were our children. They were very forgiving, liberal, open-minded about the students, both academically and non-academically. The individual faculty were very forgiving. I wanted to take a humanities elective from the English professor George Mayhew, who was also Master of Student Houses. And as house officer I'd gotten to know him pretty well. The course conflicted with another course that I had to take and I was going to have to miss his class two times out of three every week through the term. I went to talk to him about that and he said, "Oh, Marty, no problem; I know your work; I know your writing. I'll just make sure that you have the assignments and know when the tests are. It's fine. You can do that." So I registered for two courses that were basically at the same time and it worked out just fine. But I don't think that there's very many professors who would sign off on that. You hope that that's the idea of going to a small college, that they know the individual students and they can decide when that's a reasonable thing to do. But, you know, we sort of live in a rule-based society where if you do it for one person, you have to do it for everybody. And I think they would have done it for everybody, as long as there was a student with a good record.

Begin Tape 2

TANGORA: I want to [continue to] talk about the liberality, the open-mindedness of the administration, their very forgiving attitude toward students. On one side is the academic side. The administration had this honor system in place, and I certainly believed in it one hundred percent—and I think most people did—so that you could have a closed-book, limited-time, take-home exam. That meant that you could pick up the exam—it would be stapled shut—you'd take it home; and when you were ready to take it, you closed the book, opened the exam, did the exam, and then turned it in after the time had expired. If the time ran out, you had to stop yourself; and I did.

That worked in my favor in one particular case where I couldn't stand the instructor. He was perhaps a good mathematician. It was a differential geometry course. And nevertheless, his classes weren't worth going to because he would stand up at the board with his back to the class and his nose to the board and write. You wouldn't believe how small he could write with a piece of chalk. So you couldn't read what he was saying even if he would stand back, out of the way, which he didn't have the sense to do. And so I told myself after the first day, "I'm not going to this class; I'm too busy to go to this class." It was a reckless decision—I think it may have been

the first or second term of my senior year. I probably missed a mid-term. When it came time for the final exam, I picked up the final and then studied very hard for a couple of days, doing every exercise in the book; and decided if I was ever going to be ready, I was ready. I opened the exam. Did all the problems, but I didn't know if I had them right or not, and turned in the exam. It turned out I had done very well on the exam. I had a perfect score. And this instructor gave me an A! Whether he consulted with the department before doing that, I don't know. That would have been a wise thing for him to do. But I guess he decided that if I could do that exam, without coming to class and so on, then I should get an A. Why not? That shows the faith that he had in the honor system. But that's why, you know, if somebody tried to pull that on me, in the first place, I wouldn't trust him. Second place, if they got a perfect score, I'd look at their record. And if they didn't have a record—but I did because I had very good grades and the math department knew that I might not be a devoted student of mathematics, but I was a capable student of mathematics. So I got away with that, which isn't the kind of story you would hear from very many institutions, even the small colleges that pride themselves on individual attention.

Then there was the jet fighter prank where the ROTC—I forget what kind of jet it was, but I think it was a fighter, not a trainer—had parked it on the Olive Walk for everyone to admire. And the students decided that was irresistible, and they managed a prank where they took it up the street to the front lawn of the colonel in charge of the ROTC at Caltech. Oddly enough—and this required a lot of planning—the students had to get a forklift, which wasn't part of your normal equipment in the student houses. They had to divert the campus policeman—this very friendly gentleman who they loved to make fun of or to take advantage of, but he was very nice—they had to send him off on some wild goose chase so he wouldn't encounter [the students] while they were stealing the jet plane. And they got away with this, and the colonel was not amused. You know, like Queen Victoria: “We are not amused.” I think he must have called in the FBI or something like that. Now this all happened the year before I came to Caltech. But this story was fresh in everybody's mind and I heard this story many times, so I'm telling it second hand, but I have a lot of details. They laughed about how these men would come around to student housing—of course, this is Southern California; people are wearing flip-flops and T-shirts and everything—these men would come around the houses in gray suits asking if they could talk to so-and-so or if anybody knew something about that thing that happened with

the jet plane. Of course, nobody knew anything. But they also got no cooperation from the administration. The administration thought the plane wasn't harmed; nothing was harmed. It was a pretty good joke. If the FBI could catch somebody and punish them, the administration wasn't going to get involved. They weren't going to *help* find the culprits, if that's what you call them—the pranksters.

So that was in the air when I arrived; and we sort of had the feeling that if we did pranks that were harmless, the administration wasn't going to come after us for that. There was a *nice* atmosphere. You really felt like you were in a place where you were welcome. You had to stay within civilized limits of behavior, in some sense; but the administration wasn't going to be the first one to pounce on you and put you in the brig, or whatever. So that was really something unforgettably nice about when I was here.

KARKLINS: So you basically would say there was a feeling of, yes, you've come to the institute to learn, and it was a lot of hard work to learn. But the administration and the faculty saw you needed the relief of having some fun here as well—that maybe that was why they had such a liberal attitude toward pranks?

TANGORA: You know, I can't resist the old saying: Boys will be boys. There weren't any girls yet; and that phrase sort of captures the spirit that this is harmless fun—and as long as it's harmless. In Ricketts House we had a tradition called the “brake drum,” which was a big brawl that happened twice a term. We thought it was a great tradition. The administration was worried about it; and I guess they were right, because around my senior year, somebody got a broken leg in this. They kind of clamped down on it. But that was just an example of how it's okay to goof off—just don't go too far; then reasonable rules were put down, if necessary.

KARKLINS: Would you like to discuss [Kent Clark] a little bit?

TANGORA: Yes. I got to know Kent Clark very well. There was another man on the faculty besides Kent Clark who I got to know even better. That was Ed Hutchings [Edward Hutchings, Jr.]. He wasn't exactly faculty. He was here because he was brought in to be the editor of *Engineering & Science* magazine; and he turned it into a really outstanding alumni and science and engineering magazine. Ed also functioned as the advisor for the student publications—not

so much the literary magazine. It's kind of odd because I was the co-founder of a humor magazine; there hadn't been one. There had been a literary magazine; and when we tried to get students to submit stuff for the humor magazine, it was all literary stuff. It all belonged in the other magazine. They wanted us to publish it, but they didn't quite get the idea of writing something funny or naughty. That was a hard go.

But anyway, Ed was the advisor for the weekly newspaper, *The California Tech*. He gave a course called Journalism, which met one hour a week. *The Tech* was put to bed on Monday night. If you were the editor, you had to go to the print shop on Wednesday because this was letterpress printing. And then the paper appeared on campus on Thursday morning. And at eleven o'clock Thursday morning, Ed had a copy all marked up with his red grease pencil, and the journalism class was open to people who were on the paper. So I got to know Ed quite well that way.

And then Kent Clark. I'd had him for freshman English; and he liked my work and he often encouraged me. I don't know how serious he was, but he often said to me things like, "Why don't you forget about this math and science and become a writer?" I wasn't a hundred percent devoted to mathematics as the previous anecdote [on page 3-4] may have suggested, although I did have a career in mathematics. Anyway, I got to know Kent. And then there were four summers after I graduated—within the ten years after I graduated, in '57—when I had summer jobs out here in Southern California in the space industry. I would exploit my connections at Caltech, mostly in the humanities, to do things like get a key to Dabney Hall and the Steinway grand piano in Dabney and go and play the piano there over the weekend. People like Ed Hutchings and Kent Clark would help me with these things. Ed also had a very attractive daughter who was the right age for me to date her. I dated her a little bit. And the Archives has an interview where Kent interviews me after I had shown him my diary—I kept a diary in college, and Kent's always been interested in diaries, and he's always been interested in Caltech. I never knew Kent from the musical comedy side. I was just fascinated to find out that he had written all this musical comedy material in honor of various faculty members retiring. There's a musical about [Caltech President, 1946-1969] Lee DuBridge and stuff like that. That was a side of him that I was never exposed to. He didn't mind sending me tapes of some of this stuff and it's very good stuff. He was a real prize. And Ed Hutchings was a real prize. I *hope* that somewhere people have a video of Ed talking, because nobody else in the world talked the way

Ed Hutchings did. He would roll his eyes and make funny expressions on his face. It was just marvelous to talk with him. It's too bad he was gone before the age of YouTube. And Kent, too, for that matter; also a great hail fellow well met. I was very proud to be their friend. I came out to California for Ed's funeral, up in Sonoma.

KARKLINS: Well, I thank you for taking time and joining us.

[Tape ends]